

The Doctrine of Providence

It's safe to assume that most people know that God built the universe, the world, and each one of us individually. Providence teaches how God keeps all of that creation running. Lets start with a definition. Providence is God's personal and active preservation and governing of everything that he has made.

God does this through preservation, concurrence, and through government. We will cover each one in turn, starting with Preservation.

Preservation means that God is the personal and ultimate agent responsible for the existence and maintenance of the created order. Maintenance is the key word here. Heb 1:3 "He is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of his nature, and **he upholds the universe by the word of his power...**" Everything is held together, actively, by God. Acts 17:25, "...since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." And Acts 17:28, "...In him we live and move and have our being...". As we read these statements, notice that they are present tense. He GIVES to all, not gave. God is present, constant and active in sustaining our life. Colossians 1:16-17 is similar, but expands on that and I'll return to that verse later.

Matthew 5:45 is interesting, because it brings an aspect that we kind of know, but may not have specifically thought about. "...For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.". God looks after both good people and evil people. He's demonstrating his goodness to them. God directly manages everything for everyone, and he doesn't delegate.

Concurrence. God is the ultimate cause of everything, yet He cooperates with created things in every action, by directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do. God is the primary cause, and the creatures are the secondary cause of every action that they perform. This one is much more complex. It's likely easier to start with natural phenomenon, and learn through seeing some examples. Snow and Rain fall. We can ascribe that to a natural source, for example clouds carrying moisture which drops on the Earth. But behind that, is God, causing it to happen. All of Job 37 focuses on this particular one of God's methods for managing the earth.

So when we hear someone say "I was a successful business person because I was lucky", that sounds humble. But it really isn't. In a universe which is ordered by God, there is no such thing as luck. This is God's ordering of things. Proverbs 16:33 says "The lot is cast into the lap, but it's every decision is from the LORD." Proverbs 16:9 "The heart of a man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps."

We need to lay this foundation, because it's important. God is the primary cause, and we are the secondary cause. We are a cause. So we are personally responsible for evil choices we make. James 1, for example, "God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." God is not the author of evil.

What that means is that when we say that the human person is the secondary cause, we mean that the person is really responsible. They are making real choices in the real world, with real consequences for

which they will be held accountable for before God. Man is not simply a robot, with no say and no choice about anything in his life. Man makes choices. Yet God also involves himself in everything that happens. Proverbs 21:1 “The king’s hand is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”

So when we see things that don’t happen the way we want them to; an election, for example, and we think “evil”, “not my choice”, or whatever; we need to understand that God put that person into that office through the votes of the populace. We need to understand too, that God makes the best decision for everyone, especially himself. God’s focus on himself in creation makes sense, since he created the universe as a theatre to put his glory on display. Humans exist to bring God glory, and God choosing the best for his own glory helps draw our attention from ourselves, and onto him.

God controls everything. Even illness and death. This is often where things become harder for Christians to understand, but it’s important to take time to understand this BEFORE you are placed into this circumstance. This is the reason that we believe it’s important for us to teach this deeply and regularly to those in the Christian community. So lets look at the ultimate example of God being sovereign over evil; the crucifixion.

Jesus’ death happened according to the predetermined plan of God. That included betrayal by a close companion, being wrongly accused, unfairly beaten, and unjustly executed by people that deserved only his punishment and from whom Jesus deserved only their praise.

This is a good doctrine that we struggle with all the time. Fear of heights? Fear of flying? Know this. Nothing can happen outside God’s plan for your life. Put another way, “YOU ARE INVINCIBLE, as long as God sustains your life.” Psalm 139:16 says “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” God is orchestrating everything in our lives, constantly, according to his own plan.

When evil happens, it doesn’t catch God off guard. The Trinity does not hold emergency meetings like “Oh, NO! They ate the fruit, what do we do now?” God directs and works through secondary causes so that the things and the persons themselves are active in bringing about his ordained end.

We have watched over the past decade or so, as buildings have collapsed, and as floods have happened, and as Tsunami’s have done tremendous destruction, and people have asked why. Unfortunately, we have heard far too many people respond in an unbiblical way, protecting God from bearing any responsibility. But the Bible will have none of that. Amos 3:6 says “...If a calamity occurs in a city, has not the LORD done it?” This should be reassuring because rather than inspiring fear that something has happened that God can’t control, or can’t rescue us from, we know that He’s in complete control, and we can feel confident and secure in the knowledge that what happened has happened according to his plan and for his purpose.

Jesus even directly addresses the purpose in Luke 13:4, where he says “or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” This isn’t a

judgment on a city or a nation. It's a merciful reminder to those who are left that judgment is coming. The people who are left can be awoken to the fact that they can avoid the wrath of God which is coming. It's God saying judgment is coming, and I want to save you. You can't save yourself. You need me, and I am here for you.

It's also important to see that God doesn't take pleasure in evil. He uses it to get our attention, and to remind us that the enjoyment of our life on earth isn't the reason for our existence. In countries where Christians are being persecuted, this is clear to them, but that's less obvious for us here in North America. We generally have an easy life, and we often forget how deeply we depend on God for our existence. We also forget what our existence is meant to accomplish. We're here for a purpose, and our purpose isn't about our own self esteem. It's not about us at all. Colossians 1 "...All things were created through him, and for him...". We're here for him. Evil reminds us that we are not to simply waste time focusing on ourselves and the brief flicker of our existence; "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14); rather, evil is a reminder to focus on what we were created to do, that is, bring glory to God with our lives. 1 Peter 4:11 "...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." 1 Cor 10:31 "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." When we see evil, it should remind us of what our priorities are, and where we should be focusing.

Several years ago, a Christian movie was released that focused on a Christian school, and especially on that school's football team. "Facing the Giants" was a powerful movie, and one of the points that the football team struggled to learn what their purpose was. Quite clearly, the team was meant to point to a reality that also applies to us as individuals as well. One of the lines was "When we win, we praise him. When we lose, we praise him". As members of the body of Christ, this needs to be true of us as well. God is in control of everything around us. He ordains it for our good and his glory. Just because we cannot see God's good plan in a circumstance does not mean that God doesn't have a good plan for it. We can see through God's word that he has promised us only good. We can also see that over and over, when we see what initially seems like a terrible circumstance ultimately it has been orchestrated and used for our good, and his glory. That was true with Adam and Eve's first sin; it was true when a giant warrior faced off against a little shepherd boy named David; it was true when a mother set Moses, her little baby adrift down a river in fear for his life; it was true when a Pharisee named Saul devoted himself to persecuting Christians and it is true in the circumstances we are facing now.

In good and in evil, God is working out his plan for our good and his glory. As Christians, we are called to draw attention to God through our lives, and through our actions. This isn't something that is always easy. As one example, sharing our faith with others is often a scary and difficult task. However it draws attention to the wonderful work God has done to save us from the sin we willingly commit. In the same way, choosing to trust God's good plan when circumstances seem evil is also very difficult, and requires effort and discipline on our part, as we behave in ways that people around us often cannot understand. The doctrine of providence assures us that God is in control of everything, that he isn't caught off guard and that the best basis to build our lives upon is the trustworthy Word of our loving and all powerful God.